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EDWARD L. GLAESER
Transparency is the cure for those fifth-term blues
By [Edward L. Glaeser](#)
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PRESIDENTS ARE said to suffer from “second-term blues” - a mixture of executive exhaustion, legislative frustration, and accumulated embarrassments. What then can save Mayor Tom Menino from a “fifth-term funk,” especially since the economic downturn has put him in a fiscal straitjacket? The mayor’s best chance to make his fifth term important is to morph from manager-mayor into institution-builder by enacting systemic changes, like an independent accountability office, that will permanently improve the transparency of Boston’s government.

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The mayor’s opponents, especially challenger Kevin McCrea, have long disputed his claim that “we’re more transparent than Saran Wrap.” Much of the criticism is unfair. The “Boston About Results” website, for instance, is a significant Menino innovation that provides easy-to-use data about city services like Fire Department response times and police case clearance rates.

But more can and should be done to provide voters with ready information about the state of city government. Ideally, transparency would mean an abundance of user-friendly data comparing Boston’s performance with other cities. Ideally, data would be created by an independent agency, like the Government Accountability Office in Washington, that doesn’t report to the mayor. Ideally, budget data would appear quickly and projects would be evaluated with a scorecard. Menino should saddle his successors with the kind of intrusive oversight that sitting mayors find annoying and oppressive.

The past 16 years have been good ones for the city, but the government’s success reflects the energy and commitment of an exceptional mayor. Good systems don’t require great leaders - they get the best out of ordinary mortals. New York City’s exceptional school chancellor Joel Klein, thinking about his own legacy, wants “to hold everyone accountable, to improve teaching, to make information transparent to the public” by providing “an enormously powerful data system that is increasingly part of the DNA of the entire system and that will help sustain our reforms long after we are gone.”

In Boston, the budget, the school system, and the Boston Redevelopment Authority could all use more transparency. McCrea wanted the city to post all of its expenses above \$1,000 online, but data on dollars isn’t enough. Activity-based costing provides a tool for linking spending with results; every city service is linked to its cost. Budget transparency would be best served by an independent agency, perhaps a significantly enhanced Boston Finance Commission, with an obligation to determine and publicize what Bostonians pay for each city service, and to compare costs and quality with other cities.

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Nationwide there has been a revolution in assessing school quality, made possible by the abundant testing inflicted on our children. Yet when I checked “Boston About Results,” the link to the education performance page was broken. Parents should be able to learn about the average test score gains achieved in the past by their children’s schools and possibly by individual teachers. Menino deserves much credit for embracing choice within the public school system, but that choice works best when parents and taxpayers know what they are getting.

Elsewhere in city government, the BRA has been the target of many complaints about opaqueness. I find much to admire in the authority, but it could use a dose of transparency. The public should be able to easily get information - from a single online source - on what the BRA spends and what taxpayers are getting in return. Similarly, the public needs to know more about the delays involved in permitting new projects. (Indeed, the mayor could also improve Boston by speeding the permitting process, but that’s another column.)

This fifth term provides an opportunity for the mayor to think in terms of decades rather than days, and to plan for a post-Menino future. There is little hope that future mayors will, early in their terms, adopt information rules that publicize their every misstep. Yet that glare is good for Boston. It is up to Menino to create a transparency system that reveals his successors’ imperfections, which will ensure his legacy as the manager who became a statesman.

Edward L. Glaeser, a professor of economics at Harvard University, is director of the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston. ■

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